

Gelins Go Online: Social Support and Empowerment on Facebook for Vulnerable  
Women in Azerbaijan

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2018

Reading Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

International Studies (Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies)

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**Abstract**

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This research contributes to understanding the importance of online social support for populations that experience greater stress and isolation, offering novel opportunities for coping to individuals with limited access to offline sources of support. In the context of Azerbaijan, a patriarchal and patrilocal society, daughters-in-law are a vulnerable and isolated population. This study presents a theoretical framework of social support in the context of vulnerability and isolation as experienced by women in Azerbaijan. Based on observation of a women's pregnancy and mothering Facebook group, it illustrates different types of social support exchanged online and their implications for coping with stress, reducing isolation, and facilitating empowerment.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Online parenting groups are a popular place for new parents to seek and receive support. Social support, as one of the most important means of “buffering” the negative effects of stress and overcoming isolation, is an essential resource exchanged in online parenting groups. Digital spaces provide easier access to support, especially for populations whose sources of offline support are inadequate. Research has shown that receiving social support is especially impactful for those who experience greater stress and isolation, as they benefit from its positive psychological effects even more. The transition to parenthood is, in general, a stressful and isolating time for all new parents. However, this study focuses on a group that is considerably more vulnerable and isolated—new daughters-in-law in Azerbaijan, called *gelins*. Azerbaijan is a

society in which women have low mobility, and due to patriarchal and patrilocal norms, *gelins* are subject to particularly stressful and isolating conditions.

This study presents a theoretical framework of social support in the context of vulnerability and isolation as experienced by women in Azerbaijan. By observing an Azerbaijani-language closed Facebook group for pregnancy and mothering, the author seeks to understand online social support interactions in contexts where new mothers may have fewer offline sources of support. This study also discusses the role of online social support in empowerment processes and possible implications of receiving online support for women in patriarchal and patrilocal societies.

## 2 SOCIAL SUPPORT IN ONLINE PARENTING GROUPS

### 2.1 ONLINE PARENTING GROUPS

The growth of the Internet and social media has seen the proliferation of topic-based online support and discussion groups. Online parenting groups, especially those catering to mothers, are one of the most popular types of online communities. The transition to motherhood is a time of stress and isolation during which many women turn to the Internet and social media to connect and share experiences with other new moms. Online parenting communities tend to be supportive environments in which critical or negative comments on other members' posts are frowned upon, and possibly subject to removal (Das, 2017). Even in situations where members share attitudes or feelings that violate the norms of the group, these posts are given passive support in that they are not responded to negatively, but also do not receive the typical slew of positive comments (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Das, 2017; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Madge & O'Connor, 2006).

Online parenting groups are particularly popular during pregnancy and the first few years of parenthood (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2017; Tomfohrde & Reinke, 2016), as this is a time of increased social isolation (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Researchers extol the potential benefits of online parenting groups to mothers and mothers-to-be who find that their social networks shrink as they spend more time at home, face logistical barriers to face-to-face communication, are separated from extended family, and feel a lack of support from their partners (Sjöberg & Lindgren, 2017; Brady & Guerin, 2010). As with online support seeking generally, parents who judge their *offline* sources of support to be inadequate are more likely to seek and benefit from *online* support (Rains & Wright, 2016).

Even when offline support is available, research shows that due to members' shared circumstances, participants in online support groups place great value on the informal, experiential knowledge offered by other new parents with whom they connect online (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016; Brady & Guerin, 2010; Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Johnson, 2015; Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Sjöberg & Lindgren, 2017), sometimes judging it to be more reliable than information and practices passed along by their own mothers (O'Connor & Madge, 2004). In addition to the ability of the Internet and social media to connect individuals with others who have shared experiences, there are several characteristics of computer-mediated communication that are particularly conducive to supportive interactions among such groups of individuals. For example, research has found that the 24/7 availability of computer-mediated support (Das, 2017; Madge & O'Connor, 2006), where one can receive nearly immediate feedback (Das, 2017), is a key affordance of online parenting groups. Members can have their questions answered any time of day, even at night when offline support from physicians, friends, and family is not readily available. A member can also choose to only read content without actually participating in the

conversation, e.g. “lurking” (Brady & Guerin, 2010), which can still be an important source of support and information (Rains & Wright, 2016; van Uden-Kraan, Drossaert, Taal, Seydel, & van de Laar, 2009).

Moreover, there is evidence that the anonymity and asynchronous nature of computer-mediated communication promotes more open, candid forms of discussion in these groups (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008; Madge & O’Connor, 2006). Parents can ask questions without fear of judgement (Barak et al., 2008) or any pressure or guilt to follow the recommendations they receive (Johnson, 2015; Madge & O’Connor, 2006). Online communication that is completely or partially anonymous allows members to feel more comfortable expressing themselves or discussing embarrassing (Brady & Guerin, 2010) or stigmatized topics (Rains & Wright, 2016; Sjöberg & Lindgren, 2017). Parents may feel comfortable asking questions of their online community that they feel too embarrassed to ask health professionals, or worry are minor concerns that would inconvenience their doctor (Madge & O’Connor, 2006; Pedersen, 2014).

Online parenting groups often foster trust among members of the community, which can lead to the them becoming a space for the discussion of issues beyond those related to parenting (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). While under studied in research, these discussions can include politics (Rowe, 2017) and even controversial topics, such as sex-selective abortions in Turkey (Multlu, 2017). In particular, feminism, problems with men, and challenging the patriarchy and medical establishment become common topics of discussion in some online parenting groups (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Madge & O’Connor, 2006; Pedersen & Smithson, 2013).

## 2.2 SOCIAL SUPPORT

Research into online parenting groups has largely focused on one primary aspect of these groups—their use for seeking and receiving social support. Norms of positive interaction, 24/7 availability irrespective of location or time of day, and (semi-)anonymity combine to make online parenting groups a useful and comfortable place to connect with other parents and seek support. Parents venting their feelings in hopes of encouraging or empathetic responses, asking for information or advice to solve a problem, or buying and selling used baby items are all examples of resource exchanges common in online parenting groups that can be understood through a social support framework. Social support, notoriously varied in its conceptual and operational definitions (Wethington & Kessler, 1986; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), is traditionally understood as an umbrella term related to providing assistance to others which promotes their well-being (Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997; Rains & Wright, 2016; Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). However, social support also has particular effects in its relation to stress, psychological vulnerability, isolation, and empowerment, which are consequential to understanding online social support in the Azerbaijani context.

### 2.2.1 *Social support and stress*

Social support is an important coping resource which is widely recognized for its ability to “buffer” against stressful situations (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Rains & Wright, 2016; Shumaker & Brownell, 1984; Wethington & Kessler, 1986), meaning it “can help to prevent stress by making harmful or threatening experiences seem less consequential, or provide valuable resources for coping when stress does occur” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 246). Online support groups have become an important resource for coping with, managing, and reducing stress by connecting members with a community of individuals dealing with similar stressors who are well-placed for providing

appropriate social support (Rains & Wright, 2016). Stress is a normal part of both life and parenting, and in many cases cannot be fully overcome. Thus coping with stress involves minimizing, avoiding, tolerating, and accepting stressful conditions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which many parents find online social support to be helpful with (Bartholomew, Schoppe-Sullivan, Grassman, & Kamp Dush, 2012; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005).

### 2.2.2 *Social support and vulnerability*

Psychological vulnerability is when individuals and groups are more psychologically reactive to the impact of life events and stress compared to others, often due to a lack of psychological or social resources for coping (Thoits, 1984). Social support can reduce vulnerability by increasing coping resources, thereby moderating the impact of stressful life events and reducing feelings of isolation (Thoits, 1982). Social isolation refers to the lack of a satisfactory social network of friends and acquaintances, whereas emotional isolation is the absence or loss of close attachment relationships with a spouse, family members, or very close friends (Weiss, 1973). Taken together or separately, social and emotional isolation are the cause of loneliness (Weiss, 1973), the experience of which prompts individuals to recognize the deficiencies in their relationships and seek the social supports which are missing from their lives (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014). Thus, isolated individuals are simultaneously those most in need of social support, and those most likely to seek it out.

In addition to the potential support benefits of online groups during *periods or stages* of increased social and emotional isolation, there is hope, and some evidence, that disproportionately vulnerable or isolated *groups* (e.g. divorced or single parents, communities of color, parents of children with disabilities or uncommon medical problems, young mothers, LGBTQ parents) benefit even more from the social support that online parenting groups provide

(Brady & Guerin, 2010; Barak et al., 2008; Nieuwboer, Fukkink, & Hermanns, 2013). For example, Ammari & Schoenebeck (2016) found that stay-at-home dads, “turn to social media to overcome isolation and judgement they might experience in other contexts” (p. 1373).

### 2.2.3 *Social support and empowerment*

Social support has also been implicated in processes related to personal empowerment, whereby individuals can “access skills and resources to cope more effectively with current as well as future stress and trauma” (Johnson, Worell, & Chandler, 2008, p. 109). Empowerment processes occur in online support groups through receiving social support more broadly, particularly exchanging information, along with finding positive meaning and helping others (Mo & Coulson, 2002). Some scholars have argued that the processual act of writing and sharing one’s story and emotions in an online group can in and of itself lead to empowerment (Barak et al., 2008; Hoybye, Johansen, & Tjornhoj-Thomsen, 2005). Social support exchanges are central to the mechanisms by which participation in online support groups leads to theorized empowerment outcomes, which include better coping and higher degrees of self-care and self-efficacy (Mo & Coulson, 2012); general improvements in psychological well-being and sense of control (Barak et al., 2008); and increased self-esteem, optimism, control, and acceptance (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2009).

The focus on empowerment processes and their relationship to positive psychosocial effects may make more sense in the literature on cancer and HIV/AIDS online support groups, where the primary challenge facing members is coping with stress resulting from their illness. In contrast, many of the factors contributing to the disempowerment of *gelins* are external and connected with social structures of inequality, and the psychological coping resources theorized

to be empowering for members of other online groups can only do so much to respond to *gelins'* contextual sources of stress, isolation, and vulnerability. For that reason, this study also examines the link between social support and empowerment through a development-oriented conceptualization of the pre-conditions and processes of women's empowerment as *resources* and *agency*, respectively. Resources, broadly defined, are obtained from social relationships and strengthen one's ability to make choices. Agency is defined as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them," and in addition to decision-making, encompasses bargaining, negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion, resistance, reflection, and analysis (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). For example, the reclamation of knowledge and authority from the medical establishment and enhancement of mothers' agency over their medical and parenting decisions has been considered an empowering outcome for mothers in some online parenting groups (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Das, 2017).

### 3 *GELINS* IN AZERBAIJAN

#### 3.1 THE PROMISE OF ONLINE SUPPORT

Given that those experiencing isolation and stress are in greater need of and benefit more from social support, studying social support related to vulnerability is an important addition to the existing literature on online social support. Thus, this study builds on prior research of online parenting groups by considering online social support interactions among a psychologically vulnerable group—new and expecting mothers in Azerbaijan—a society in which women have low mobility, and due to patriarchal and patrilocal norms, new daughters-in-law cope with particularly stressful and isolating conditions. With limited opportunities to seek social support in person, the Internet, if *gelins* are able to use it, could be their only means of receiving social

support. Consequently, both traditional forms of social support as well as social support directly related to stress and isolation are expected to manifest in the online group:

RQ1: What types of social support are sought and provided in the online parenting group for *gelins*?

RQ2: In what ways did Azerbaijani *gelins*' stress and isolation manifest in social support interactions in the online parenting group?

Additionally, social support exchanges in the *gelin* online group are expected to indicate *gelins*' experience of empowerment processes, especially in relation to the patriarchal and patrilocal context of Azerbaijani society:

RQ3: How are social support interactions in the online group implicated in processes of empowerment relevant to Azerbaijani *gelins*?

It is important to note that many aspects of stress and isolation and responses to these conditions vary between women in Azerbaijan and some women may not have experienced them at all. However, the variance is not random. Differences in class, socioeconomic status, education, urbanness, etc., matter greatly. This is seen quantitatively and qualitatively in research on women in Azerbaijan (Habibov, Barrett, & Chernyak, 2017). Nonetheless, all Azerbaijani women exist in a society where these values are considered and propagated to be essential for realizing sociocultural ideals of family life and household management. For example, although some women may not live with their husband's family, the norms for mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships are built on the scaffolding of patrilocal traditions and can be expected to maintain defining characteristics.

Due to the lack of pertinent and recent research on gender issues in Azerbaijan, this study frequently draws from empirical studies in neighboring countries with similar cultural and religious histories. The author has spent significant time in Azerbaijan and evaluated when

findings from similar societies were applicable in this study of Azerbaijan. Wherever possible, findings from numerous differently sourced survey research in Azerbaijan are presented to support generalized statements about values and beliefs made in the literature on gender in Central Asia and Azerbaijan.

### 3.2 PATRIARCHAL NORMS AND PATRILocal RESIDENCE

Marriage is the primary means through which young women in Azerbaijan and neighboring countries demonstrate normative femininity (Cleuziou, 2017). Thus unsurprisingly, many of the ideals of Azerbaijani femininity—attention to physical appearance; grace and delicacy; obedience and willing subordination to husband and in-laws; endurance in motherhood; cooking and housecleaning skills; and hospitality—relate to matrimonial and family life (Tohidi, 1998).

Azerbaijan and its neighbors are patrilocal societies (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998; Harris, 2004; Heyat, 2002; Ismailbekova, 2014), in that new brides traditionally move into their in-laws' home upon marriage, where they reside for at least a few years and sometimes indefinitely (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998). Arranged marriages are not altogether uncommon in Azerbaijan and its neighboring countries, with the young man's mother being largely responsible for supervising and approving his choice of wife (Tohidi, 1998; Harris, 2004; Hortaçsu & Baştuğ, 1998). New daughters-in-law in Azerbaijan and Central Asia are called *gelin* (alternatively spelled *kelin*), which comes from the verb *gelmek*, to come, and literally means “one who comes,” denoting the patrilocal tradition of brides moving away from their natal family (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998; Harris, 2004; Turaeva, 2017).

Despite some changes in newlyweds setting up separate households in Azerbaijan in the post-Soviet period, especially in urban areas among the middle-class (Heyat, 2002; Mandaville,

2009), young couples are still very much reliant on and duty bound to the husband's family and kinship network (Tohidi, 1998). Survey research also suggests the persistence of multigenerational households in Azerbaijan. According to the Caucasus Research Resource Center's 2012 "Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey in Azerbaijan," the mean number of adult household members was 3.58, with a range of 1-10 adult members and a standard deviation of 1.32. Over three-quarters of Azerbaijani households have more than two adults, and over half have more than three adults.

The glamour and extravagance of weddings in Azerbaijan and Central Asia, and the eagerness with which young women anticipate marriage (Roche, 2017; Turaeva, 2017), contrast sharply with the hardships of day-to-day life as a *gelin*. Norms of patrilocal residence and reliance on one's husband's family act as controlling and repressive forces in the lives of Azerbaijani women (Tohidi, 1996, 1997; Heyat, 2002). Being a *gelin* is more than just a label: "[K]elin is a social category that has a special status...a *kelin* has a very low if not the lowest status, not only in family and kinship networks but also in her neighborhood..." (Turaeva, 2017, p. 172). The remainder of this chapter will contextualize *gelins* as a population rendered vulnerable to stress and isolation by patriarchal and patrilocal norms in Azerbaijan.

### 3.3 STRESS

Stress stems from evaluating a situation as challenging or threatening, and exceeding one's ability to cope (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Research in psychology often gauges an individual's stress through a measure of cumulative stressful life events that the individual has experienced (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Many of the most glaring sources of stress characteristic of *gelins'* lives in Azerbaijan are related to their status and role in their husband's family, where they are treated

as marginal, dependent members whose long-term security and belonging can often feel uncertain.

### 3.3.1 *Relationship with mother-in-law*

A *gelin*'s relationship with her mother-in-law is often difficult and taxing (Harris, 2004; Ismailbekova, 2014). Over half of Azerbaijanis believe that daughters-in-law are beaten or treated badly by their mothers-in-law (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2012). Older women whose sons are married often have greater authority than the *gelin* over household decisions (Heyat, 2002), including over the family's finances, planning life-cycle celebrations (Ismailbekova, 2016), making decisions about the health of family members (Meurs & Giddings, 2012), and even making personal decisions about the young couple's marriage (Turaeva, 2017). A mother-in-law can represent a serious threat to a *gelin*'s security in her new family. Failure of a *gelin* to meet a mother-in-law's exacting requirements and prove herself a diligent and obedient worker can be just cause for expulsion from the family and marriage (Harris, 2004). Mothers-in-law sometimes convince their sons to divorce a *gelin* they feel threatened by (Harris, 2004; 2011), or intimidate a *gelin* by threatening to do so (Ismailbekova, 2016).

### 3.3.2 *Division of labor within the household*

*Gelins* are expected to demonstrate deference, especially to their mother-in-law, which most often manifests as physical labor. Upon moving into her husband's parents' home, a *gelin* takes over a large share of the housework responsibilities. She must show that she is obedient, hard-working, respectful, and able to get along with all members of the family (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998; Ismailbekova, 2014; Roche, 2017; Turaeva, 2017). During the first year of marriage, in particular, *gelins* take great pains to prepare fancy meals, dress nicely, maintain a tidy home, and welcome

guests with exceptional hospitality. When their in-laws are entertaining guests, *gelins* rarely partake in the social gathering, but rather spend the evening preparing and serving the meal (Turaeva, 2017).

In Azerbaijan, gender divisions in household labor are observed from childhood (Heyat, 2002; Hortaçsu & Baştuğ, 1998; Mahmudova, 2017) and may exacerbate *gelins'* workload in the family. Young boys are only expected to perform domestic tasks in the case that there are no female children to assist their mothers (Heyat, 2002). In a 2012 survey, 96% of Azerbaijani women reported being taught as children to prepare food and clean the house, compared to 35% of Azerbaijani men (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2012). It is thus unusual for men in Azerbaijan to help out with household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry (Heyat, 2002; Hortaçsu & Baştuğ, 1998; Mahmudova, 2017; Mandaville, 2009). Childcare, as well, is the province of women (Hortaçsu & Baştuğ, 1998; Mahmudova, 2017), with 85% of Azerbaijanis reportedly believing that changing diapers and feeding the kids is the mother's responsibility (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2012).

### 3.3.3 *Becoming pregnant*

Concerns about being expelled from the household are exacerbated by the fact that *gelins* are under tremendous pressure to get pregnant. It can be said that, “the ultimate goal of a woman is and was motherhood, more or less, in all of Central Asia” (Roche, 2017, p. 29), a sentiment which has also been well-documented in Azerbaijan (Mahmudova, 2017; Mandaville, 2009; Tohidi, 1998). Having children secures a woman's status in her household, giving her a greater sense of confidence and reassurance that her husband will not divorce her (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998; Ismailbekova, 2016). Ideally, a *gelin* should become pregnant with her first child within four or five months after her marriage, and no later than after the first year (Hortaçsu & Baştuğ,

1998; Penkala-Gawecka, 2017). This social norm is evident in the contents of a *gelin*'s dowry, which often includes baby toys and clothes (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998). Inability to conceive is highly stigmatized and widely considered grounds for divorce (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998; Harris, 2004), a decision which is often made by the husband's parents (Turaeva, 2017). If a *gelin* is not able to get pregnant right away, it causes fear that her in-laws will find a new *gelin* (Penkala-Gawecka, 2017) and send her back to her parent's home (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998; Harris, 2004; Turaeva, 2017). Divorced women face heightened social marginalization and difficulty remarrying (Harris, 2004; Hortaçsu & Baştuğ, 1998), which significantly raises the stakes for *gelins* trying to get pregnant.

Additionally, many *gelins* face substantial pressure not only to become pregnant, but to become pregnant *with a boy*. While the birth of any child is a joyous occasion in Azerbaijani families, male children are greatly preferred (Tohidi, 1998; Mahmudova, 2017) due to the higher economic cost of marrying off a daughter (Heyat, 2002), the expectation that sons will provide for parents in their old age, and the general social status and prestige that welcoming a boy into the family precipitates (Mahmudova, 2017). A *gelin* may find that she only feels fully accepted by her husband's family when she gives birth to a baby boy (Ismailbekova, 2016; Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998). Sex-selective abortions are not uncommon in Azerbaijan and can be considered indicative of the pressure women feel to have a male child (Mahmudova, 2017). Azerbaijan has one of the highest sex ratios at birth, with 117 boys born for every 100 girls in 2010 (compared to a normal range of 103-107) (Duthé, Meslé, Vallin, Badurashvili, & Kuyumjyan, 2012). The ease of obtaining an abortion, the availability of affordable ultrasound technology since the 1990s, and the growing desire for smaller families all contribute to the rise of sex selective abortion in Azerbaijan and its neighbors, Georgia and Armenia (Duthé et al., 2012). In the 2011 Demographic and Health

Survey (DHS), 35% of Azerbaijani women reported having had an induced abortion, and 70% of those women had undergone more than one. Despite the under-reporting of abortion related to son preference, Duthé et al. (2012) estimated that 7% of induced abortions reported in the 2006 DHS survey were a result of sex selection.

#### 3.3.4 *Financial dependency*

In marriage, *gelins'* agency over personal and household finances is limited. High unemployment and decreased wages in female-dominated sectors such as health and education (Sabi, 1999; Mandaville, 2009; Najafizadeh, 2003) contributed to a return of women to the domestic sphere in the decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Heyat, 2002). A *gelin* who does not work may find it hard to persuade her mother-in-law or husband to allocate family funds for her use, whether for buying necessary items or attending school (Ismailbekova, 2016). According to survey research in Azerbaijan, only 19% of married women were employed (Azerbaijan Republic Ministry of Health, 2011). A different survey showed that 47% of Azerbaijani women had no personal income, compared with 16% of men. Among those who did earn personal income, there were notable gender disparities in wages, with the majority of women earning less than \$250 per month, and the majority of men earning more than that (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2012).

Whether a *gelin* works or not, she is granted minimal autonomy to spend and save on her own. Most *gelins* that work outside the home will be obliged to turn over their paychecks to a mother-in-law or husband (Harris, 2004; Mahmudova, 2017). Of those married, working women surveyed, only a quarter decided themselves how to spend the money they earned (Azerbaijan Republic Ministry of Health, 2011). An overwhelming 80% of Azerbaijanis believed that men should make the final decision in household matters (Caucasus Research Resource Center,

2012), and approximately one-third of Azerbaijani women took no part in decisions about household purchases (Azerbaijan Republic Ministry of Health, 2011).

### 3.3.5 *Physical vulnerability*

The general dependency of *gelins* in their husband's family in some cases make them more vulnerable to abuse. Survey results showed that over 60% of married women in Azerbaijan have experienced physical violence from their husbands (State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2006). Moreover, two-thirds of Azerbaijanis believe that *gelins* are beaten by their husbands and many believe that this is justifiable (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2012).

Many of the countries of the former Soviet Union, including Azerbaijan, have comprehensive laws protecting women's rights in marriage (against domestic violence, marital rape, etc.), divorce, and custody of children. However, as in the case of contemporary Azerbaijan, these laws are inconsistently enforced (Tohidi, 1998; Wilson, 2017). Victims of domestic violence, which is most common when a woman resides with her husband's family (Najafzadeh, 2003), are often discouraged by police and judges from reporting their husband's abuse or divorcing him, often by insinuating that the husband's actions were justified or shaming the wife for breaking up her family (Mahmudova, 2017; Wilson, 2017).

## 3.4 ISOLATION

### 3.4.1 *Social and emotional isolation*

*Gelins* are physically isolated from the outside world and lack autonomy over their own mobility. Much has been written about the strict limitations on women's mobility and public sociability in Azerbaijan more broadly (Heyat, 2002; Mahmudova, 2017), but *gelins* face additional mobility challenges. A new *gelin* must ask permission from her mother-in-law or

husband to go to the doctor, attend events, or visit friends and family, and it is not unusual for a *gelin*'s requests to be denied (Turaeva, 2017). Survey research in Azerbaijan found that nearly three-quarters of women reported that their husband insist on knowing where they are at all times (State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2006). A different survey found that half of Azerbaijani adults believed that a husband is justified in beating his wife if she goes out without telling him (Habibov et al., 2017), and just 11% of women independently made decisions to visit others outside of the house (Azerbaijan Republic Ministry of Health, 2011). *Gelins* also face practical mobility challenges, in that fewer women than men know how to drive. In a nationally-representative survey, 67% of Azerbaijani men reported being taught how to drive in childhood or as a teenager, compared with only 11% of women (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2012).

The first few years of marriage can also be a time of emotional isolation for a *gelin*, in that they lack a close figure to confide in. *Gelins* are often made to feel like an unwelcome outsider in their husband's family (Harris, 2004) and expected to limit their interactions and conversation with family members and visitors (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998; Ismailbekova, 2014). Moreover, husbands tend to show more affection and support for their parents than their wife or children (Harris, 2004; Roche, 2016). While new *gelins* are largely confined to the home during the first year of marriage, husbands are rarely home during this period, spending much free time in the company of friends celebrating their marriage (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998).

In contrast, *gelins* are isolated from their former lives and the friendships they had prior to getting married. *Gelins* are sometimes discouraged from communicating with their natal family (Baştuğ & Hortaçsu, 1998). In fact, mothers-in-law may prefer to find a girl from further away when selecting a bride for their son for fear that their *gelin* will spend too much time at her own

parents' house after marriage (Ismailbekova, 2014). Young wives also lose touch with their friends after they get married, who they are usually not permitted to see or invite over to their husband's home (Harris, 2004; Turaeva, 2017). Azerbaijani women, in general, do not spend a great deal of time with friends, with 42% never or rarely spending time with friends, as opposed to 20% of men never or rarely spending time with friends (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2012). Also, it is not uncommon for *gelins* to be disallowed access to the Internet, especially in earlier years of marriage (Pearce & Vitak, 2016).

Finally, it should be stressed that the attitudes and circumstances described herein are not unique to Azerbaijan and that women around the world experience a lack of power with regards to mobility, family, education, health, agency in decision making, and cultural expression (Giele, 1977). Nonetheless, the contextual circumstances presented in this paper illustrate the inordinately stressful and isolated situation in which many *gelins* exist. In such circumstances, social support, as one of the most important resources for mitigating stress and overcoming isolation, can be crucial.

## 4 METHOD

### 4.1 DATA

The data for this study were the posts and comments published to a closed Facebook group for Azerbaijani-speaking women about pregnancy, birth, and motherhood during a 5-month period when the author acted as a nonparticipant observer. The group has nearly 20,000 members, 6 administrators, and averages 300 posts each day. Posts garner anywhere from 20 to 200 comments.

In order to join the group, prospective members must answer questions related to their gender, marital status, whether they have children, and how actively they plan to participate in the group. The author identified herself to the administrators as an unmarried, childless graduate student, and was forthcoming about her role as a researcher and a “lurker.” She never posted or commented, but could be visible as a member of the group if another member opted to look at the member list. The author used her authentic Facebook profile (active since 2006) with her full legal name, recent profile photo, geographic location, education history, and some past Facebook activity visible to any Facebook user.

## 4.2 PARTICIPANTS

Facebook is very popular in Azerbaijan, with over a quarter of adults regularly using the site as of April 2018, although there are marked gender disparities in use with 55% of adult men and 26% of adult women using the site (Pearce, 2018). According to demographics obtained from Facebook’s Audience Insights tool on adult women’s overall Facebook use in Azerbaijan, 62% of adult women users are younger than 35, they overwhelmingly access Facebook through a mobile device, and the majority report living in Baku, Sumgayit, and surrounding suburbs. All posts and comments to the group of study were published in Azerbaijani.

## 4.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study adopts an unobtrusive method, in that informed consent was not obtained from participants. “Lurking” as an unobtrusive observer in an online community is sometimes viewed as problematic (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Mutlu, 2017). However, there are several important considerations that factored in the decision not to obtain informed consent in the present research context.

First, many participants took independent measures to protect their identities when using Facebook. While Facebook is not typically considered anonymous, as accounts are linked to a public profile with identifying information, this is not necessarily the norm for Facebook use in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani Facebook users, particularly women, employ a variety of strategies for maintaining anonymity and circumventing surveillance while using social media (Pearce & Vitak, 2016). There was evidence that such strategies, for example, maintaining multiple pseudonymous profiles with limited personal information, were common, although not ubiquitous, among the participants in this study.

Second, the large size of the group's membership had implications for both the practicality of obtaining informed consent and members' expectation of privacy. Large online groups make contacting every active member publishing posts and comments and keeping track of members who choose to opt-out or withdraw prohibitively difficult (Hewson, 2016). Also, scholars have argued there is a higher expectation of privacy in small online groups with memberships in the dozens and hundreds, whereas larger groups, such as this one, may be considered more public (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

Third, the author also considered the value of the research and the potential harms of disclosure. Hudson and Bruckman (2004) argue that unobtrusive "lurking" is justifiable if it allows valuable research to be conducted. Furthermore, disclosure of the author's presence may influence participants' behavior in the online group, potentially jeopardizing the validity of research results or causing harm to the participants by reducing trust in the group (Hewson, 2016).

Given the unobtrusive method adopted in this study, the sensitive nature of topics discussed, and the vulnerability of the population, the author has erred on the side of caution in

minimizing the risks of traceability and participant identification. Following standard ethical guidelines for Internet research, the name of the online group was not disclosed and direct quotes were not used (Hewson, 2016). The author is confident that the dual steps of translating data from Azerbaijani into English and subsequently obfuscating and consolidating examples that remain representative of the data (see Markam, 2012) are sufficient measures for protecting participant confidentiality.

#### 4.4 DEDUCTIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This study represents an attempt to assimilate theories from communications, psychology, and anthropology into a unified theoretical framework, and therefore demands a method which offers unusual levels of flexibility without sacrificing analytical rigor. Braun and Clarke (2006) contend that “through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (p. 5). The data were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis, a theory-driven approach to thematically coding qualitative data which provides a detailed analysis of *a particular aspect of the data* (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the present study, RQ1 focuses on social support generally and was analyzed according to a coding scheme of House (1981)’s social support subtypes, which are *instrumental*, *informational*, *appraisal*, and *emotional* support. Adapted versions of House (1981)’s typology of social support have been used in other studies of social support in online parenting groups (Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Evans et al., 2012; Madge & O’Connor, 2006).

RQ2 and RQ3 alternatively focus on specific theoretical concepts in psychology—vulnerability, stress, isolation, and empowerment—which the author hypothesizes to be relevant

to online social support for this population based on engagement with ethnographic research on gender and family life in Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

The research process proceeded in two stages. During the first two months of study, the author became acquainted with the group in order to understand how it worked, how much and what kind of content was posted, what periods of day were most active, who the moderators were and how they interacted with members, and what official rules and informal norms of behavior governed members' activity. In the subsequent four months, the author collected data in the group 4-7 days per week. As group members were posting in real time, each day that data was collected the research screen captured all posts published in the previous 24 hours. Every post captured was read and classified according to the type of social support being requested, or as non-supportive. On days that data was collected, the author spent 1-2 hours reading and coding posts. Nearly all content posted in the group was seeking or offering some form of social support, usually related to pregnancy and motherhood. Rare examples of posts that were not classified as social support included memes without an accompanying message or general congratulations to members on a holiday.

Next, the author identified posts related to the sources of vulnerability, stress, and isolation as previously gleaned from the literature about *gelins* in Azerbaijan and neighboring countries, and coded them according to those themes. These posts accounted for between 20-35% of all social support posts published on any given day of data collection. For the posts related to *gelins'* vulnerability, the author also read the comments so as to include in analysis the types of support provided rather than simply requested. The author notes the difficulty of strictly coding each post as a single type of social support given that multiple forms of support may be requested in a single post, or commenters may provide a different type of support than was requested. Further,

some social support requests, such as asking for a specific piece of information, are more straightforward than others, like an emotional support request manifesting as venting about a stressful situation without asking for help or advice. Even so, it was clear that the majority of posts primarily sought informational support, followed by appraisal, with substantially lower incidences of emotional and instrumental support being sought. In the smaller dataset related to vulnerability, stress, and isolation, there was a higher incidence of instrumental and appraisal support compared with the overall social support data.

## 5 RESULTS

### 5.1 INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT

*Instrumental support* provides tangible goods and services that directly help the person receiving support (Krause, 1986; Langford et al., 1997). A noteworthy example of instrumental support common in online parenting groups is the buying and selling of items among members (Hall & Irvine, 2009; Moser, Resnick, & Schoenebeck, 2017), and the group in this study was no different. It is important to note the localized nature of this group likely contributes to the high volume of posts requesting instrumental support compared to prominent online parenting groups which have been extensively studied. The concentration of members in a single urban area inevitably makes common examples of instrumental support, such as development of face-to-face friendships easier (Chan, 2008).

Nevertheless, the frequency and variety of tangible aid offered in the group was striking. *Gelins* traded, shared, and gave away maternity and baby gear. Another instrumental support exchange that was often seen in this group were requests for childcare – short and long-term, allowing members to leave the house for work, school, or leisure purposes. One member posted:

*"I need a babysitter for one evening in Sumgayit. If anyone is available, write me, it's urgent!"*

Commenters expressed interest, inquired about details, and sometimes recommended a friend or tagged others member known for their willingness to babysit.

Instrumental support may also include friendships initiated in online parenting groups which develop into “real life” friendships as members get to know one another and organize offline “meet-ups” with those geographically proximal to them (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Chan, 2008; Hall & Irvine, 2009; Pedersen & Smithson, 2013), directly helping to reduce the isolation many new parents experience (Doty & Dworkin, 2014). The localized nature of the group enables this more. It was not uncommon to see evidence of friendships that began in the group but eventually moved to offline meetings. Sometimes members made requests for meet-ups, like *“Heyyyy dearies, should we meet IRL? What do you say? [MEMBER] please also tag [OTHER MEMBER] in this one. Let's meet! There are some girls here that I love! I wanna meet them in real life. ♥♥♥♥.”*

Requests for help were a notable form of instrumental support. Certainly help requests are common on social networking sites where users reach out to their own friend list for assistance (Ellison, Gray, Vitak, Lampe, & Fiore, 2013) but in this group, the requests were to a group of strangers. A common type of request was self-promotion for entrepreneurial activities, especially those based online. Members selling clothes, accessories, or handmade items were common, as were nail and hair services. This kind of advertising and self-promotion was nominally forbidden in the group, but members who made requests with sufficient tact or citing desperate circumstances, like an out-of-work husband, were given tacit approval by administrators who let the post remain. One such member wrote, *“Girls, I'm sorry for posting I know I'm not supposed*

*to. I'm selling things I've knitted like hats and baby booties. I have infants at home and my husband hasn't worked in several months. Whoever wants to, please make an order."*

Members who showed consideration for the rules of the group received abundant support—finding members to purchase their goods, getting subscribers to their Instagram or YouTube-based businesses, and receiving encouragement for their efforts and promises to recommend their goods or services to others. After having her post deleted once, a member tried again, posting: “...I recently started a YouTube channel to sell my handmade clothes and I am posting everywhere trying to get subscribers.” Dozens of members commented saying they had subscribed and wished her luck, and the original poster thanked them for their support:

*Commenter: I subscribed. Good luck!*

*Original Poster: Thaaank you! God bless you for subscribing! My relatives laughed at me for starting the channel. They said it was stupid, and it was really starting to get me down.*

*Commenter: I watched your videos and your handmade things are very interesting. I really like them and think you should keep at it. Don't pay any attention to what your relatives say. And don't be discouraged. It's important to love your work and follow your heart. I wish you luck!*

*Original Poster: Girls, thank you all so much! I went from 52 to 67 subscribers 😊 God willing everything will work out. I love this group so much for helping me! God bless you all.*

More directly related to vulnerability, the requests in this group were often tied to economic hardships. Women posted about their unemployed husbands seeking work, for example: “*Hi girls, my husband is a mechanic but he can't find work right now. He's driving a taxi and not making enough to pay our loans. Please, does anyone here have a husband, acquaintance, or relative who could give him a job, as a mechanic or something else? He's 31, educated, and has 5 years of work experience. Please write in the comments.*”

Numerous requests for donations of goods for needier members were also present. For example, one member organized a charity drive: “*Hi all! If the admins allow it, I was thinking that*

*whoever has maternity clothes, baby clothes, baby carriers, or any other gear, we could donate them to members in need. It's a good deed, but it will also give me something useful to do while I'm sitting at home.*" This group seemed to be generous in responding to such requests as well as with fundraisers for disadvantaged members, especially those with sick children. Medical care in Azerbaijan is supposed to be provided by the state, but provision of care is often lacking and paying out of pocket expenses and bribes is common (Kazimova, 2016). Group members with seriously ill children sometimes made graphics with children's photographs and bank account numbers for funds transfers, allowing other members to spread the word even outside of the group.

A particularly noteworthy example of instrumental support seeking came from a *gelin* who wrote: *"Hey girls. I got in a fight with my mother-in-law and she kicked me out of the house. Now I need a place to stay for 1 night then I'll go back to my house. 🙄🙄🙄🙄"* Other group members were quick to offer both advice and lodging. One of the first commenters suggested that the *gelin* go to her parents' house, yet subsequent commenters, seemingly total strangers, invited the *gelin* into their own homes, noting their neighborhoods. This is quite surprising as Azerbaijanis tend not to invite strangers into their homes (Pearce, Barta, & Fesenmaier, 2015), yet multiple women offered. The willingness of members in this group to request and provide each other concrete, tangible aid was far and above what has been documented in other online parenting groups, and often dealt with trying circumstances related to *gelins'* isolation and vulnerability.

## 5.2 INFORMATIONAL SUPPORT

*Informational support* is provided during times of stress (House 1981; Krause, 1986) and usually relates to problem solving (Cronenwell, 1985). Unlike instrumental support, which is helpful *in and of itself*, informational support helps an individual cope with a problem herself (House, 1981). Informational support is one of the most frequently noted uses of online parenting groups.

These groups provide both general and specific information (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Johnson, 2015; Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Pedersen & Smithson, 2013), often related to health and wellness (Lee, 2016). Members share informal information such as advice and personal experiences, in addition to more formal sources of information from books, websites, or their own physicians (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Hall & Irvine, 2009; Johnson, 2015; Pedersen & Smithson, 2013). Informational support also comes in the form of recommendations for goods or services. For example, group members who live near one another share localized resources such as suggestions for daycare providers, play spaces, and places to shop for baby items (Hall & Irvine, 2009). The *gelin* group was no exception to this, with frequent requests for general parenting help and medical advice.

As informational support is focused on problem-solving, it is unsurprising that members frequently requested advice for dealing with their mothers-in-law, whether with regards to specific disagreements, as in the case of a member whose mother-in-law would not give her any money to buy maternity clothes, or general advice for keeping the peace, such as: *"Girls how on earth do you get along with your mother-in-law? Teach me."* Another ubiquitous concern among members was advice for getting pregnant, especially for members who had been married for some time with no luck conceiving, such as a member who wrote *"Hi girls. I've been married 4 months and I'm still not pregnant. Is there anyone who got pregnant after 4 or 5 months without getting treatment? What did you do? All anyone wants to know is if I'm pregnant and it's so annoying."* Other members asked for advice about IVF treatment, such as what the stages were, how much it cost, and whether it worked.

The pressure to become pregnant quickly demands that *gelins* take decisive actions toward this goal, as illustrated by this exchange:

Original Poster: *“I am a bit embarrassed to ask, but I’ve got a question for you girls and I need your advice. Do you know any positions that are good for getting pregnant? And after sex what do I need to do to make sure I get pregnant?”*

Commenter A: *“Do some reading on the Internet. Google it. There’s a ton of information written about this.”*

Commenter B: *“Don’t stand up immediately after you have sex. Instead, lie on your right side for a while. And don’t wash yourself right away. Hot water will kill sperm.”*

All of this pressure to prove one’s reproductive capacity is complicated by the fact that there is little sexual education in Azerbaijan, especially for women (State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2006; United Nations Population Fund, 2015). Research has shown low levels of knowledge about sexual topics (Bradley, Mursagulova, Nosa, & Searing, 2007; Azerbaijan Republic Ministry of Health, 2011), and with strict chastity norms (Heyat, 2006), most *gelins* have little sexual experience before their wedding night (Azerbaijan Republic Ministry of Health, 2011; United Nations Population Fund, 2006). Moreover, discussing sexual topics is taboo in Azerbaijan, even with medical professionals. Consequently, reproductive health knowledge is low. In surveys, just a quarter of Azerbaijani women were able to correctly answer questions about timing of fertility cycles (Azerbaijan Republic Ministry of Health, 2011), and 70% of Azerbaijani women reported not having seen any family planning messages in the preceding months. Hence the informational support provided by the online parenting group is critically important. The Internet and social media can be essential tools for sexual education (Nwagwu, 2007; Schimmel-Bristow & Ahrens, 2018), especially when the information is culturally-contextualized (Flanders, Pragg, Dobinson, & Logie, 2017).

In the group of study, fertility timing was a common focus of discussions about becoming pregnant, with commenters providing accurate information about ovulation and women’s menstrual cycles. Also, although newer *gelins* desire pregnancy, women do want to control their fertility at other stages of their marriage and space out pregnancies (State Statistical Committee

of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2006), and contraceptive methods, most notably the IUD and lactational amenorrhea, were commonly discussed.

Indeed, a notable finding was the amount of informal sexual education informational support that took place in the group. Other research has shown that online parenting groups can offer information and non-judgmental support to members who are uncertain about their sex lives during pregnancy and after childbirth (Pedersen, 2014), but in Azerbaijan, this may be even more important. Like Pedersen (2014) argues about Mumsnet being a frank space for mothers' discussion of sex, it is very likely that spaces like these are the only place for open sexual discussion for women in Azerbaijan. Even if the information shared is sometimes medically erroneous, the discussions themselves are unlike anything that could exist in Azerbaijani society normally. Members were able to seek answers to many kinds of sexual questions, although it was standard practice to preface them with "I'm sorry" and "excuse me." For example, one member wrote, *"Hi girls, I'm sorry to ask something like this but did anyone else notice that their sex drive decreased during pregnancy? Mine is nonexistent. Sorry again for asking."* Other members were less apologetic, and openly shared resources they had found online and thought would interest the group. For example, one member shared an article about female condoms, adding her own commentary that, *"It is good for protecting against pregnancy and disease. Every day women are getting abortions and suffering and men don't care. Never be ashamed to learn about ways to protect yourself."* Women also sought information for their husband's sexual health problems—*"Emergency!! Can you recommend a doctor for erectile dysfunction in men? Or any other advice you have for this?"*

Given the lack of sexual education in Azerbaijan, sexual information shared in the group undoubtedly has an impact on the members' lives. Yet within this group, there were times where

medically incorrect advice was given, notably in discussions of sex selection techniques, as occurred in response to posts like: *“Girls, if I keep track of my ovulation is it possible to get pregnant with a boy? God willing, I really want to plan for a son with this method.”* Many women in the group believed there to be methods for conceiving a male child related to timing of conception (depending on time of month or time of day), sexual positions, or timing of orgasm. Some members dismissed these methods, while others expressed confidence in their effectiveness. There was also disagreement regarding the existence of alternatives to sex-selective abortion, as illustrated by this post: *“Hi ladies. I have two girls, praise God, but my husband wants a boy too. I don’t know what I can do, but I can say that I don’t want to suddenly get an abortion if it is a girl because I am scared it is a sin. I heard that if you get a blood test quickly to determine the sex, there is something else you can do besides abortion?”* A debate ensued about whether medical abortions achieved via drugs such as misoprostol and mifepristone should in fact be considered abortions.

Therefore, while incorrect information was sometimes corrected in this group, certain “facts” continued to propagate. In the case of sex selection, it should be noted that the information received, although some of it incorrect, may also have functioned as valuable emotional support for women feeling stressed about a situation beyond their control. Many expressed emotional relief and a feeling of reassurance from learning about sex selection strategies.

### 5.3 EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

*Emotional support* concerns the provision of caring, empathy, love, and trust (House, 1981; Krause, 1986) and its positive impacts on health, well-being, and coping with stress are widely recognized (House, 1981). Emotional support is one of the most common forms of

support exchanged in online communities (Rains & Wright, 2016), and parenting groups are no exception (Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005).

*Gelins'* isolation was alluded to in posts thanking other members for their support, such as: “*Hey ladies, I know I’m tiring you with my long messages, but what else can I do? You understand and help me more than anyone,*” and “*Hi my dears! You are like sisters who always support me in my sorrow and in my joy. I am so grateful to you for entertaining me every day. God bless every one of your babies 🍀🍀🍀*” This study found numerous examples of support being requested and given. For example, congratulations for positive events like pregnancy and birth announcements (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005) and sympathy for negative news were ubiquitous (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016; Brady & Guerin, 2010, Chan, 2008; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005).

As a consequence of *gelins'* isolation, support from the online group is especially crucial in cases when emotional support is needed regarding those in one’s life that would typically provide emotional support, such as a partner or other family member. Indeed, online parenting groups provide a forum through which members can vent frustrations, share personal stories, encourage and reassure one another, and seek empathy, especially about marital and other family issues (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Doty & Dworkin, 2104; Hall & Irvine, 2008). For example, a member announced that her first ultrasound was positive, reporting on the fetus’ dimensions and heartrate, despite her mother-in-law’s negativity about her pregnancy. Commenters immediately provided emotional support in the forms of both congratulations for the healthy pregnancy as well as vile spewed towards the negative mother-in-law and ideas about mother-in-law management. Moreover, a great deal of emotional support was tied to women’s struggles with conceiving and sustaining a viable pregnancy, for which heart-felt prayers and well wishes were offered.

A key advantage of receiving emotional support from an online group of close to 20,000 members is that there is always someone online and ready to help, no matter the time of day. For this reason, members often turned to the group when they were worried or scared, as this member was at the onset of labor—*“Hi girls. I’m 38 weeks pregnant and just now I was bathing at the public bath and I lost my mucus plug. I called the doctor quickly. He said wait for labor pains. I am so nervous, pray for me.”*

Many members also sought reassurance about information they received from their mothers-in-law. Mothers-in-laws are often the purveyors of distressing superstitions or folk wisdom, which *gelins* relied on the group to debunk. Many members used humor at the expense of mothers-in-law to ease these concerns. The following thread is typical of such posts, albeit in response to one of the more innocuous myths:

Original Poster: *“My mother-in-law told me my baby will have a medical condition causing excessive drooling if I eat sunflower seeds while I’m pregnant! Is there a chance it’s true? I’m nervous”*

Commenter A: *“Don’t worry dear. I read on the Internet that sunflower seeds contain natural progesterone, so actually they’re good for you.”*

Commenter B: *“My mother-in-law said eating them will make my baby naughty 😂😂”*

Commenter C: *“Oh these mothers-in-law 😂😂😂😂”*

Commenter D: *“That’s complete nonsense, sunflower seeds have a lot of vitamin C, they’re healthy.”*

Most online support groups operate with the expectation, whether explicit or implicit, of mutual reciprocity of emotional support (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). This was clearly the case in the *gelin* group, with it being incredibly rare for a post to get fewer than 10 comments. Even in instances when members did not have information or advice to share, they still posted messages of congratulations or well wishes, for example, phrases such as *“may God send you a cure”* or *“may God help you”* on posts about pregnancy complications or sick infants. Sometimes commenters would tag other members who they knew from previous comments would be able to

provide appropriate support. Having access to a large network of sympathetic, responsive individuals may partially compensate for the deficiencies in gelines' social networks and attachment relationships.

#### 5.4 APPRAISAL SUPPORT

*Appraisal or affirmational support* communicates information relevant to self-evaluation (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; House 1981). Appraisal support helps individuals gauge how their situation compares to others' and affirms the appropriateness of their actions (House, 1981; Langford et al., 1997). Appraisal support is distinct from informational support in that the goal of the latter is problem-solving while the goal of the former is judging the extent to which one conforms to some norm (House, 1981). Appraisal support is particularly important for online parenting groups, because new mothers sometimes lack a frame of reference for determining the normality of their child's development or their parenting choices. Comparing experiences with other members and having one's own experiences affirmed is a common form of support in online parenting groups (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Hall & Irvine, 2009). Drentea & Moren-Cross (2005) note that many parenting group posts explicitly seek this form of support by ending with the question, "is this normal?" Questions regarding normalcy were similarly common among members of the *geline* group, and often dealt with pregnancy symptoms, breastfeeding practices, and babies' sleeping and eating routines. Getting answers to these seemingly mundane questions relies on the functional ability to connect with a large number of other new mothers. Therefore, the crowd-sourcing of feedback on how other mothers' parenting practices and experiences compare with one's own takes on greater importance for socially isolated groups, who are less able to get comparable feedback offline.

Economic concerns featured prominently in requests for appraisal support. For example, price comparisons of doctor's visits and medications were typical: *"Girls, hey, I have a question. Who's your doctor and what are their prices like? We decided on a doctor at [NAME OF CLINIC] but he charges 45 USD for a doctor's visit and another 25 USD for an ultrasound. I am in my first trimester and he says my visits will cost about 175 USD...maybe you can recommend a doctor with more reasonable prices?"*

Sometimes appraisal support requests were in line with *gelins'* vulnerability, for example, regarding stressful or taboo topics. Sexual questions, experience with divorce, and abortion were particularly popular, especially given the lack of discussion of such topics normally in Azerbaijani society. This was similarly found in a study of a women's online group in Turkey (Mutlu, 2017). In connection with divorce, members wanted to know what reasons others used to justify their split, asking *"Girls is there anyone here who is separated? What could make you decide to break up your family?"* and *"Girls, who here is on their second marriage? If it's not a secret, why did you get divorced?"*

Members also sought to establish norms for different aspects of marital relations and family life. Comparisons of living arrangements were common. *Gelins* still living with their in-laws asked, *"When did you girls get a separate apartment with your husband? what factors sped up or slowed down this process?"* Other times they wanted to know how other members interacted with their husbands: *"I have a question for married girls. When your man is out at work or at the café late at night with friends, how often do you call and text him? For me, I only call once around noon. I'm bored at home with my mother-in-law but I know calling him too much will annoy him. How often do you think is good? Are these texts and calls necessary for you?"*

Other appraisal support requests were tied to authority in the family. For example, in Azerbaijan, as with many cultures, 40 days postpartum takes on significance for both mother and infant (Geçkil, Şahin & Ege, 2009) and group members sometimes asked questions regarding activities that should or should not take place during this period. In some cases, members were seeking support in response to disagreements within the household. For example, a member posted about her mother-in-law believing that an infant should not be washed before they are 40 days old, as to not catch a cold. The *gelin* secretly washed the baby and declared him more comfortable. Commenters noted that they too had secretly washed their baby and that the original poster had done the right thing. Many shared the number of times that they had washed their baby, at what age, and suggested the right water temperature.

There were also examples of appraisal support that encouraged members to disregard norms of postpartum isolation. Conversations about how often members went out with the baby in the first few weeks and months of infancy were standard. In some instances, appraisal support seemed to function as permission, with members looking to the group to give them sufficient support to justify an action, such as in the following thread:

Original Poster: *“Hey ladies. So the baby is finally past the 40-day mark. Do you think I can go to a wedding now?”*

Commenter A: *“My husband and I went to a big party when my baby was just 2 weeks old!”*

Commenter B: *“I went out before 40 days too”*

Original poster: *“If everyone else agrees with you guys, I’m totally going!”*

Commenter D: *“Don’t be ridiculous! Go out, girl! You shouldn’t pay attention to superstitions.”*

This example also demonstrates the tendency for appraisal support to be offered in all instances when members sense that their experiences will help others, even if the poster does not explicitly ask when, how, where, or to what extent other members experienced something.

## 5.5 EMPOWERMENT PROCESSES

Research on empowerment in online parenting groups has utilized a psychological definition of person empowerment, whereby participants in online support groups are empowered through processes including sharing experiences and feelings, receiving social support, exchanging information, helping others, finding positive meaning, and recognition through interpersonal relationships (Barak et al., 2008; Mo & Coulson, 2012; van Uden-Kraan et al., 2009) Moreover, many authors outline the mutual reciprocity of helping others in online social support exchanges as a key empowerment process (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). As this paper has outlined, active members of the *gelin* group undoubtedly experienced many of these processes through their exchange of instrumental, informational, emotional, and appraisal support. Members were observed transitioning from “newbies” to more active members, expressing pride in their ability to offer support to others and being celebrated for their contributions as they moved into a more veteran stage. Indeed, administrators regularly posted lists of the top contributors for a given month, writing *"Here's the list of 15 most active users this month! Stay active, girls!"* If we believe that participating in online groups, through sharing one's own story and helping others with their problems, is in and of itself empowering, the examples of social support herein are a positive sign of this group's effect on its members.

However, the usefulness of the above conception of empowerment seems questionable in the context of an online group whose members' stress is primarily a result of external social structures. In following Kabeer (1999)'s assertion that measurements of empowerment “cannot provide an accurate measurement of changes in women's ability to make choices, they merely have to indicate the direction and meaning of change,” this section explores how online social support in this group provided resources and fostered agency in ways that could enhance *gelins'*

ability to overcome some of the constraints they face in potentially transformative ways. In order to tie the constraints of life as a *gelin* to empowerment via the social support provided in this online parenting group, the author notes the following connections:

*Pressure to become pregnant quickly.* The group was a resource for learning ways to become pregnant and often included frank discussions of members' sexual practices, which is noteworthy in light of the lack of sexual education and knowledge in Azerbaijan. Members expressed appreciation for the heightened sense of control they felt over their own reproduction. Additionally, receiving affirmation from women who had trouble becoming pregnant and eventually did was likely reassuring, which can reduce stress. Members routinely surveyed other members about how long it took them to become pregnant in specific circumstances (for example, after marriage, after an abortion, after a caesarean delivery, after their first child, after they stopped breastfeeding, etc.). The informational and appraisal support received in this group would be difficult for the *gelins* to acquire otherwise, especially considering taboos about such discussions in Azerbaijani society.

*Mother-in-law relations.* With challenging mother-in-law relations being another prominent stressor for *gelins*, the support and advice for management of mother-in-law relations and emotions could be the most significant aspect of this group. This support is markedly introspective, with discussions of not only the mother-in-law herself, but also a *gelin's* own emotions about her mother-in-law relationship. Online support exchanged in the group could also be interpreted as challenging the authoritative knowledge of mothers-in-law. By routinely questioning the veracity of information provided by mothers-in-law, countering it with contradictory evidence from other sources, sharing stories or anecdotes making fun of mothers-in-law, and comparing experiences of going against their mothers-in-law's wishes, *gelins*

demonstrated agency, expressed as subversion and resistance (Kabeer, 1999), which could potentially cross over into their everyday relationships with their mothers-in-law.

*Family hierarchy.* *Gelins* lack agency, especially in terms of decision-making. Social support found in this group could have an effect on this, especially informational support. According to the 2011 DHS, just 16% of Azerbaijani women independently made decisions about their own healthcare. The online group provided a space for them to ask health-related questions at any time without embarrassment and find information about what doctors and hospital were good or bad. Members also regularly posted their medical reports or lab results and received help interpreting them. These social support exchanges demonstrate gains in resources and agency connected with empowerment in the realm of personal health. Similarly, members sought informational and instrumental support in the group that could provide them with greater authority in their own households. For example, group members made instrumental support requests for help finding jobs for their husband or a rental apartment for a good price. Members asked about medical issues for other members of their family, and recommendations for the best schools to send their children to; hypothetically able to come back to their families with informational capital. Or, women that asked for product recommendations could be more engaged in household purchasing decisions, something that older studies of Azerbaijan noted as a pertinent area of lack of agency for women.

*Emotional isolation.* Emotional isolation and lack of an attachment figure is a major problem for *gelins*, yet, the frequency of discussion of bettering marital relations may ease this problem. Agency can also express itself as analysis and reflection (Kabeer, 1999), and having a place to work through challenges to maintaining strong bonds with one's partner could be an empowering process. In this way, appraisal support helps *gelins* gauge what is normal and learn

of attainable alternatives. For example, in a society where 40% of people reportedly believed that women should tolerate violence in order to keep their family together (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2012), seeing women successfully divorce their husbands could provide a relatable example for *gelins*. Collaborative discussion of commonly found marital problems and ways that others found to cope with them could help a *gelin* find ways to cope with her own. The collective sense-making brings about new reflective understandings of coping mechanisms which address problems shared by many members.

*Social isolation.* Undoubtedly the reduction of social isolation is a major draw for online parenting groups more broadly. Given the social isolation of *gelins* and the numerous examples of transitions to offline friendships due to the group, this is an important outcome. All forms of social support—instrumental, informational, emotional, and appraisal—can reduce social isolation, and online social support being more accessible and private allows a path to these.

*Physical mobility.* The effects of the physical isolation that *gelins* experience are mitigated with informational support given by the group. For example, physical mobility was dealt with in discussions of how to leave the house with a baby in tow, how to take public transit, and other learning opportunities that would be very difficult to find without the group. One member inquired in the group, “*Hi girls. I’m interested since I don’t have experience with this. How are you all getting around with a baby without having a car? Isn’t it hard to get off the bus with a stroller? I live in Xirdalan and there are never any seats on the routes I use. Maybe using taxis is another option.*” Emotional and appraisal support related to physical isolation were evident when members empathized with one another about being stuck at home for several days on end or compared strategies for fending off boredom.

On each of these dimensions related to stress, vulnerability, and isolation, the social support available to members of the Facebook group helped *gelins*' define new goals and obtain practical resources necessary for attaining them, whether it was material aid, information, love and caring, or examples to aspire to.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This study of an online parenting group in Azerbaijan provides additional evidence that members of such groups engage in various forms of social support seeking and provision. This context differs from much previous research on online parenting groups in a few meaningful ways: its localization, the vulnerability and isolation of its members, and the empowerment possibilities in a strongly patriarchal, hegemonic system. Empowerment is theoretically, empirically, and practically challenging to study. It is crucial to recognize that women's empowerment in Azerbaijan, as anywhere, is undeniably complex and tied to political, religious, economic, and other factors. For that reason, this study has attempted to problematize the reliance in online support group literature on measures of personal psychological empowerment that do not address structural constraints on women's ability to make their own choices. It does so by introducing a development-oriented definition of empowerment and demonstrating how the social support exchanges in this group constituted resources and agency, the pre-condition and processual elements necessary for achieving empowerment outcomes.

Limitations of the current study are numerous and often relate to the method. The members of this group do not represent all *gelins*, notably because of their access to the Internet and social media. It should also be acknowledged that women able to use Facebook are possibly more likely to have greater agency in other areas of their life. Nonetheless, if one assumes that some of the

members experience *gelin* life as per what the literature says it is like, this social support and potential empowerment does matter. Future research should develop methods for measuring the specific empowerment outcomes relevant to the socio-cultural context of the online group participants being studied. This relates to a weakness of the design of this study: while unobtrusive, without greater contextualization and understanding of the lived experiences of these women, it is difficult to draw direct conclusions about vulnerability and isolation and the relationship to social support and possibly empowerment. Although a difficult-to-reach population, interview studies could help bridge this gap.

The author also wants to emphasize that she is not Azerbaijani, and that while this affords distance to explore these topics, she has tried to present Azerbaijani society, *gelins*, and this group as respectfully and ethically as possible. It is her hope that stress and isolation can be reduced for anyone experiencing it in any way that they can.

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